

Postmethod Condition And Its Implications For English Language Teacher Education*

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ABSTRACT

Postmethod condition refers to the qualities of the contemporary era in English language teaching in which previously well trusted methods are put under serious scrutiny and in which a body of methods and techniques collected from all previous methods and approaches are used pragmatically with a belief that such an eclectic practice leads to success. Such practices, under the postmethod condition, are in constant influx, bringing continuous changes in both pre-service and in-service professional development programs. The aim of this paper, thus, is to discuss the relationship between this postmethod condition and a variety of English language teacher education practices situated in Turkey.

Key words: Postmethod, methodology, teacher education, postmodern, change.

ÖNSÖZ

Yöntem-sonrası durum, bir terim olarak, İngiliz dili eğitiminin günümüzde geçirmekte olduğu ve ana özelliklerini daha önceleri çokça güvenilirmiş bulunan yöntemlerin ciddi şekilde sorgulandığı günümüzdeki durumunu anlatmaktadır. Yöntem-sonrası durum geçmişten günümüze kullanılagelen yöntemlerin ve tekniklerin tümünün arasından ortama öğrenme ortamına en uygun olanlarının seçilerek kullanılmasının başarıya götüreceğine inanılan pragmatik ve eklektik bir dönemi gösterir. Bu çalışmanın amacı da İngiliz dili öğretmen yetiştirme programlarındaki bir dizi uygulamanın getirdiği güncel sorunları yöntem-sonrası dönem ekseninde irdelemektir ki bu uygulamalar yöntem-sonrası dönem içinde sürekli değişim halinde olup hizmet öncesi ve hizmet içi mesleki gelişim programlarında değişime yol açmaktadır.

Anahtar sözcükler: Yöntem-sonrası, yöntem, öğretmen yetiştirme, modern-sonrası, değişim.

1. THE POSTMETHOD CONDITION

Starting in the 1970s, teachers and researchers came to realize that no single research finding and no single method of language teaching would bring total success in teaching a second language especially as it was seen that certain learners seemed to be successful regardless of methods or techniques of teaching (Brown, 2000). This newer understanding in foreign language teaching methodology has been described as the postmethod condition because of a set of newer beliefs and assumptions surrounding foreign language teaching practices. The postmethod condition is characterized by leaving methods-only arguments to find effective strategies to teach in the most appropriate and effective way while considering the practitioner's views and roles in preparing and teaching language materials. Hence, according to the general perception of this era, instead of looking for which language teaching method is the best to follow, the language teacher must find the most effective strategies and

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techniques to enrich her or his teaching repertoire. This understanding of the individual journey of the language teacher has grown in contrast to the mainstream and widespread model of language teacher education programs which were characterized by imposing methodological concerns rather than inviting the individual language teacher to find her or his way to best teaching practices. According to this post-method pedagogy, as Kumaravadivelu (2001) summarizes:

As a pedagogy of possibility, postmethod pedagogy rejects the narrow view of language education that confines itself to the linguistic functional elements that obtain inside the classroom... The boundaries of the particular, the practical, and the possible are inevitably blurred. They interweave and interact with each other in a synergistic relationship in which the whole is greater than the sum of its parts (545).

Post-method teacher education practices have found aspirations in popular applications of foreign language teaching situated in various classrooms rather than centering around academic discussions that are detached from actual classrooms. As Harmer (2001) articulates it is extremely difficult to come to conclusions about which approaches and methods are best and/or most appropriate for our own teaching situations. However, given the fact that the postmethod condition has clearly pulled ELT methodology into the whirls of popular culture especially with the effects of discovery oriented communicative methodology that is sensitive to cultural issues surrounding the ELT classroom, a compromise between the students and the teacher on any teaching methodology is necessary. This compromise, hence, is where pragmatic eclecticism finds aspiration to exist as the only method that serves well in such a postmethod condition. Teacher education practices, largely due to this compromise, have included students' voices often in forms of needs analyses which shed light to how teaching practices should be re-structured in a continuous way.

In his review of English language teaching methodology, Salmani-Nodoushan (2006) argues that such a shift of attention signaled an era whose outcome was the construction of a new method at the expense of the total negation of past methods. The characteristics of this era are three-fold: (a) evaluation of the scope and nature of methods, (b) redistribution of theorizing power among practitioners and theorizers, and (c) learner autonomy and language learning strategies. Such an era encapsulated that the notion of good or bad method per se is misguided, and that the search for an inherently best method should be replaced by a search for the ways for the interaction of teachers' and specialists' pedagogic perceptions. As he claims, this era was realized in two different forms: (a) effective teaching, and (b) reflective teaching. The proponents of effective teaching suggest that applied linguists should theorize,

and that teachers should practice those theories. That is, effective language teaching is the outcome of the cooperation of theorizers and practitioners. The proponents of reflective teaching, on the other hand, suggest that theorizing or, at least, mediation responsibility should be placed upon the shoulder of teachers, rather than applied linguists. Both of these realizations, however, show the growing importance of the teacher as having a place and voice in theory discussions unlike the past methods discussions which treated them as practitioners rather than theorizers.

What Kumaravadivelu (2001) defines as the postmethod condition coincides with the postmodern condition both of which appeared at a time when the notion of authority was questioned or lost; the best method in teaching was ungraspable and invisible. In short, the current understanding of teacher education in English Language Teaching coincides with the postmodern philosophy affecting all disciplines, as can be seen in this particular field (Atkinson, 1999). Thus, even though postmodernism does not possess a privileged status within academia, it is moving into it, diffusing into it, and mutating it by making counter positions to be impossible without considering it. Teacher education practices in this era are conducted when the authority is under serious questioning and the best method is not easy to find unless the practice shows what works and what doesn't. Hence, teacher education practices have started to be more inclusive to the voices of the practitioners often following a more bottom-up processes of structuring the design of such programs in contrast to traditional mainstream research on and development of teachers' education and professional development which is known for its top-down processes of knowledge transmittance in which creativity and dignity of the teacher are discredited (Kincheloe, 1993). Diamond and Mullen (1999) emphasize that as Hollingsworth & Sockett (1994) articulated, teacher education can be seen as "polarized between two positions, one narrow, external accountability and control and the other of internal autonomy and limitless personal transformation" (19). Both my own experiences as an instructor of English attending professional development programs and the narratives of the participants who took part in my dissertation project point to the fact that the case of our teacher education in Turkey is still situated within the "narrow, external accountability and control position." These local views and practices and opinions need further and careful examination under the light of new approaches to professional development in order to improve the conditions of these programs. This task has become more important amidst the discussions brought forward by those who claim the existence of the postmethod condition in English language teaching methodology and practice which will be discussed later within the scope of this paper.

2. TYPES OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS

What Hollingsworth & Sockett (1994) termed as narrow view of teacher education can also be seen in mainstream educational research which conceptualizes professional development as being for the purpose of advancing institutional training goals in which the goal is the staff's acquisition of knowledge and skills (Sparks & Loucks-Horsely, 1990). Carter (1990) interprets this didactic approach as educational research has mainly focused on what teachers need to know and how they can be trained within that particular knowledge.

In contrast to this form of "narrow" view, the quest of the "limitless" view in defining the teacher can best be exemplified by Paine's (1990) argument that a fine teacher is one, like a virtuoso in music, who combines technical wizardry with heart. From English Language Teaching research, Freeman & Johnson (1998) further add that, along with this "limitless" paradigm of teacher education, the new knowledge-base of language teacher education "should include forms of knowledge representation that document teacher learning within social, cultural, and institutional contexts in which they occur" (397).

Some more recent accounts on categorizing professional development programs have focused on the philosophy behind these programs from an educational perspective. According to Richards (1998) three main approaches to teacher education have been visible in English language teacher education which are science-research conceptions, theory-philosophy conceptions, and art-craft conceptions. It can be said that in the postmethod condition the move of English language teacher education has been going from science-research conceptions towards art-craft conceptions to teaching since the most visible characteristic of art-craft conceptions is 'that commitment to a single method of teaching may impede the teacher's full potential' (Richards, 1998, p. 44).

These limitless views suggests that, in educational research, the individual's presence, needs, and perceptions have been diminished at the expense of the institutional and the external. However, there has been an increasing interest in the role of teachers' reflections and personal narratives even within this mainstream educational research. It is also my observation that professional development activities in the U.S., being more varied than they are in Turkey, tend to encourage and assist pre-service and in-service teachers to reflect on their own educational experiences and professional lives in furthering their personal and academic growth.

The field of English as a second or foreign language teaching, with its research, is also moving towards recognizing the needs and potentials of its individual practitioners. While the field is not different from the mainstream educational research with its conceptualization of professional development mostly at the institutional rather than the individual level, there are critical voices that spring and advocate for the individual teacher's centrality in developing English language teaching (Freeman, 1991; Kumaravadivelu; 2001; Richards & Nunan, 1990). Kumaravadivelu (2001) argued that changes in second and foreign language teacher education resulted in greater awareness of issues related to teacher-centered studies and reflections such as those on teacher beliefs, teacher reasoning, and teacher cognition. Kumaravadivelu describes these changes as

the 1990s witnessed a rare congruence of refreshingly new ideas that can fundamentally restructure second/foreign language teaching and teacher education. Among them are two mutually informal currents of thought: one emphasizes the need to go beyond the limitations of the concept of method with a call to find an alternative way of designing effective teaching strategies... and another emphasize the need to go beyond the limitations of the transmission model of teacher education with a call to find an alternative way of creating efficient teaching professionals... (537).

3. EMERGENCE OF THE CONTEXT: THE CASE OF TURKEY

Some other critical voices in language teaching research such like Pennycook (1989) assert that there is a need in second and foreign language teacher education and its research "to validate other, local forms of knowledge about language and teaching" (p.613) in which the context becomes an indispensable part of such a research process. Agreeing with this, Kumaravadivelu (2001) endorses the above view by stating that

all pedagogy, like all politics is local. To ignore local exigencies is to ignore lived experiences. Pedagogies that ignore lived experiences will ultimately prove to be "so disturbing for those affected by them- so threatening to their belief systems- that hostility is aroused and learning becomes impossible" (Coleman, 1996,p.11).

Researchers need to capture all aspects of English language teaching which remains an important handicap where, in Özen's (2001) words, "the roles that individuals have to fill in their professional and personal lives vary so rapidly that it sometimes becomes difficult to follow and to keep pace with them" (62). The need for such research is most visible in professional development programs where, as Ersen states (1993), the practitioners are situated in programs that are designed

to keep pace with developments, to present new knowledge, to familiarize the teachers with new technologies, to promote support among teachers and to raise their awareness of their learners (62).

In the Turkish context, research on English Language Teaching in relation to teachers' needs gained momentum in 1990s. Even though little is produced in studying teachers and their problems through qualitative research, these statistical studies pick up issues related to many ELT applications in Turkey. Özen (2001) provides a brief review of teacher education of English Language Teaching in the Turkish context in which he articulates that a needs assessment procedure has not been actualized prior to teacher education activities take place, thus showing the fact that we need the insider's (emic) perspective in our construction of our academic realities situated in these pre-service and in-service programs.

Özen's (2001) review of literature in Turkey asserts that teacher education is conceptualized as skill transmission and that teacher education is the most problematic area. However, according to Özen, the elemental problem of English language teaching in Turkey is the absence of needs analysis in most teacher education programs contrary to the fact that "it is only through needs assessment that the program is structured and teachers' involvement is provided" (63). As these views suggest, understanding dynamics of the local applications is an important need in English language teacher education programs. Knowing that practicality is a key issue in all methodological discussions in this era (Richards & Rodgers 2001), local studies should focus on practical and pedagogical issues related to ELT methods in action. As we approach this contextual problem by considering the postmethod condition of English language teaching, we should touch upon a methodological issue as an example. The use of home or target language in the foreign language classroom has always been a matter of fervent discussion. Even though this dilemma has not been solved, context based data reveal some surprising results about this problem. As Kocaman's (2000) study reveals, English language teachers possess poor linguistic abilities in both languages, English and Turkish while the fight over which language is to be used as the medium of instruction continues on. Hence, within the postmethod condition, rather than discussing methodological issues in a detached way, how certain methodological concerns are realized at these settings has become the issue to be investigated.

4. IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHER EDUCATION

Focus in recent times on realistic pedagogy implies that we can no longer depend on a transmission model of training, either for teachers or learners. We need to develop strategies that will help teachers and learners to be co-participators in the learning process (Pani, 2004). Researchers have also emphasized the importance of "starting from one's own experience" in

educational pedagogy in general (Reinharz, 1992) and in forming liberating pedagogies in particular (Freire, 1970). The focus on subjective accounts of the principles underlying classroom practice offers an important perspective on what teaching is and how people acquire the capacity to teach since the making explicit of beliefs, principles, and values can be an ongoing focus of teacher development programs. Recent research related to teacher education has seriously been studying practitioners' personal-pedagogical knowledge and informing teacher education practices how methods work for teachers in foreign language teaching classrooms. Therefore, those teacher education programs which are framed by considering this emic (insider's or practitioner's) view seem to be more adequate in finding answers to various questions coming out of teaching experiences.

How should future research on professional development programs look like? In better terms, how do we want our future professional development programs to look like? First of all, future research must be inclusive in embracing the voices, the multiple and contradictory voices, of the practitioners to build or re-form our teaching and pedagogical practices, including our professional development programs. The current literature salient in second/foreign language teacher education, in short, signals a shift towards an academic and rigorous study and understanding of the local, the individual, and the social in a subtle way as these have been neglected in previous research. In this journey, not the methods but the particular teaching techniques and strategies of individual teachers are to be studied and questioned to see how methods work for teachers rather than how teachers work to attain methods. This newer understanding in the post-method condition has brought newer forms of curricula both at schools as well as in teacher education programs. For example, it is argued that one of the many of the postmethod condition's gains, interdisciplinary curriculum and research has already replaced the monolith and specialization seeking approaches to knowledge in English language teaching methodology (Hatch, Shirai & Fantuzzi, 1996; Kumaravadivelu, 2001). Such a perspective, by freeing the individual from the traditional understandings of knowledge production, in Kumaravadivelu's (2001) words, aims to enable the practitioners of the English language teaching to construct their own context-sensitive pedagogic knowledge that will enable teachers themselves to theorize from their practice and practice what they theorize.

Training in the techniques and procedures of a specific method is probably essential for novice teachers entering teaching because it provides them with the confidence they will need to face learners and it provides techniques and strategies for presenting lessons (Richards and Rodgers, 2001). On the other hand, the growing critical view in teacher education signals

a paradigm shift in which the transmission (thus deficit) model of professional development is expected to leave its place to such models that are based on reflective practices (Smylie & Conyers, 1991) in which collaborative planning that highlights the context specific needs of the practitioners (O'Connor, 2000; Purkey & Smith, 1983). As Richards and Rodgers (2001) rightly claim, an approach or a predetermined method with its associated activities, principles, and techniques may be an essential starting point for an inexperienced teacher, but it should be seen only as that. Furthermore, as the teacher gains experience and knowledge, he or she will begin to develop an individual approach or personal method of teaching, one that draws on an established approach or method but that also uniquely reflects the teacher's individual beliefs, values, principles, and experiences. Teacher education and development programs, then, should work in between these phases so as to empower novice teachers in their own journeys from applying established methods and approaches to developing and applying their own repertoire of methodological tools and insight.

From a critical perspective this journey can be seen as a liberatory practice and programs and research that ignore the possible liberation of their subjects by veiling knowledge also deny teachers the right to self-direction, and at the end, as put by Kincheloe (1995) claims teacher education that ignores the emancipatory interest ends up only ankle-deep in the school ocean, missing a kaleidoscope of undersea activity. With this shift in mind, such reflective models help to excavate our collective conscious, adding another dimension to our understanding of our realities re-produced in these professional development programs. Such an awareness in action, inevitably, brings change in our educational practices within the postmethod condition.

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